

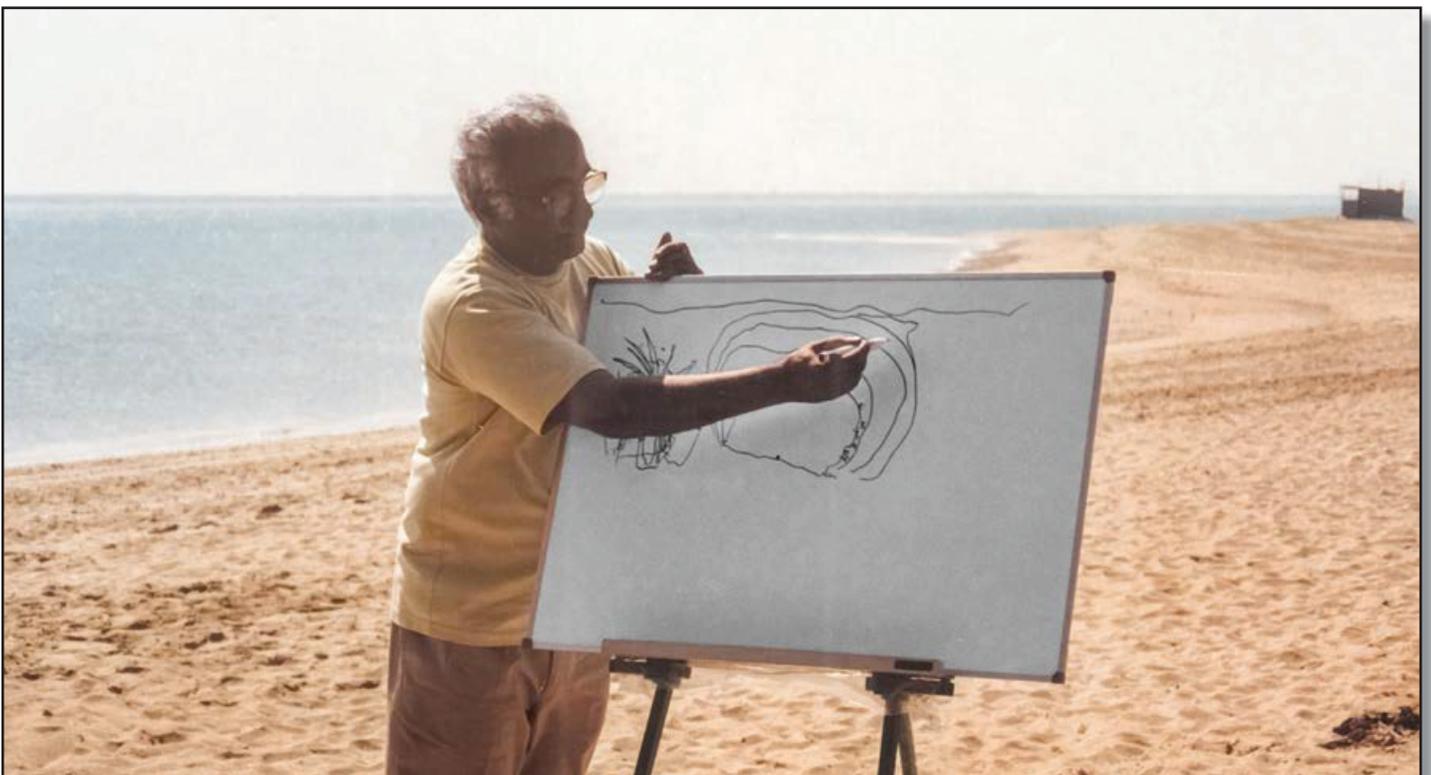
If I am asked what my single, most significant contribution has been in influencing Gujarati Society, I would point to the acceptance of permitting children out during term time by schools. Today, more school groups are spending so called academic time on excursions than anywhere in India! I propose to recommend to government to accept this huge segment of our society as a very valuable, highly sensitive target group for whom the state must admit to a high sense of responsibility even as the Administration is gearing itself to generate a vigorous promotion of tourism in the State. Our children, specially those that are “held captive” in sanctified reformatories which schools and institutions of education have progressively become, must be at the very center of any planning involving promotion that might even remotely determine the future. Tourism cannot be seen as something having no bearing on our children and youth. I consider it my bounden duty, at this juncture, to utter a warning against any casualness in this regard. My experience as a Naturalist, and an Educator compels me to advice considerable caution. Despite all the glitter and sound generated by “Vibrant Gujarat” and because of it, the youth cannot be left out. It is they who will be most attracted and most exploited.

When I spearheaded the call for conserving the easily approachable corals of Pirotan Island off Jamnagar, it was for our children that I had demanded conservation measures. Alas! Today, Pirotan is being touted as a tourist destination and the very first exclusion has been of the well organised and

tightly managed education programme that I had privilege of initiating and operating on the island in the 1980s. Already there are far too many visitors - children being “also ran”. Considerable live coral is being trampled underfoot and the sand dunes littered with plastic, paper, tobacco pouches etc., that are the hallmarks of Gujarati holiday makers. Even so the island is not receiving the numbers it should and that too without any damage. Careful and imaginative management systems and supporting infrastructure are lacking. In any case, we do not want to take international tourists to demonstrate our poorly developed civic and ecological sensibilities.

If Pirotan can be held up as a starkly demonstrative proof for taking a strong stand against encouraging tourism to wildlife sanctuaries and National Parks, we have another glaring example at the much touted Nal sarovar. I, for one, would never take any of my friends to the visitors’ point in what actually is a fantastic avifaunal extravaganza that needs no glossy brochures to promote. We had been very actively involved in drawing up management systems for the Nal sarovar early in our conservation drives. What indeed has happened to those enthusiastically discussed and put together blue prints of making Nal sarovar a great experience begs to be queried.

Even before any publicity, what has happened to the Geera Falls in northern Dangs should substantiate my fears. Already, with the pushing of a motorable road to the top of the falls we have unsightly litter draping the cliffs and floating in the



pool below. Thousands of young people had literally been baptised into the conservation movement under this cascade!

Focusing critical scrutiny on the Hingolghadh Nature Education Sanctuary, itself a direct result of the youth education programme, visitation by holiday makers is snowballing under the guise of Eco-tourism! Merely notifying protected areas and announcing with fanfare programmes, without a great deal of careful planning can only result in adverse effects which would counter all the publicity to draw tourists. All that we will succeed in doing is to insert the proverbial thin edge of the wedge in loosening the remaining restrictions and neutralizing the small measure of protection they afford. In attempting to draw visitors from outside the State, we shall be overwhelmed by numbers.

That the Gujarati, who can afford a holiday, prefers destinations outside the state should be taken note of. A large majority of Gujaratis do not travel to satiate a thirst for alcohol and in any case, the discerning tippler does not need to go places for his premium drink. He gets it in the comfort of his home. Let us accept the dismal truth that government and the tourism industry has not paid attention to the kaleidoscope of the Gujarati countryside and even today, much of the enthusiasm would appear to be resulting from a vision of glitter of monetary gains. Nothing can be more dangerous than unplanned exploitation of natural resources and, wide open spaces, expanses of blue winter skies, rose tinted dawns and gold flecked sunsets, boisterous winds and sun glittering off ocean waves are all resources - fortunately inexhaustible. In drawing crowds to specific locations, it is the noise, the jostling, the dust and the heat that need to be guarded against. Not only will dollars and euros remain dreams, the large majority of rupee spenders will be justified in continuing to spend their money elsewhere.

Having sounded deep pessimism, let me repeat - Gujarat in fact is a tourists' delight and there can be few regions on Earth more endowed with sparkle and colour than rural and (remaining) wilderness Gujarat and while sharing an enthusiasm to showcase these, I certainly want to ensure that degradation does not set in. Government and those keen to make Gujarat a world destination for holiday makers must examine the paradigms that hold the tourism industry in a rigid frame. For a start, the locations I have mentioned earlier need to have very innovative plans drawn up by specially constituted committees. We have the expertise and very considerable experience in organizing ecologically sound guidelines. Having drawn up blue prints, we shall need systems operating whereby individuals are trained and performances continually checked and upgraded to operate

the infrastructures and the services provided. It is absolutely unrealistic to close areas given the immense pressures on all sides. But, I do not want Nature to justify itself through revenues earned, rather, I want to see that revenues earned result in removing the basic pressures and help in enhancing Nature.

Few people seem to pause and ask why so many of our holiest locations are sited where they are. Sitting on the plinth of Koteswar temple in Western Kachchh I gained the understanding and the reason become starkly clear. The solitude, the immense expanses of water and an overarching sky were forceful.

The question is immediately posed: "will drawing crowds not but shatter the magnificent isolation?" It is such questions that need to be answered before Koteswar and other places like it are "popularized". Should I say "vulgarised"? It would seem impossible and yet, with care and persuasive guiding, I do not see why literally thousands cannot experience what I did. Investment will need to be in maintaining the natural ambiance and preventing the raucous intrusion of vehicles, loud speakers and flashing neon lights. Paradoxically a motivated press of humanity can enhance the splendor of a natural setting as is experienced daily at Har-Ki-Pedi in Haridwar during the 'Ganga aarti' at sundown.

Similarly, there was something magnificent in being able to look into the eyes of a full grown, wild lion from two meters. Those who scoff at the 'lion shows' fail to recognize the great success in establishing a confidence between two species that have been arch rivals down the ages. The lions of the Gir must not be equated with the lions of the Sherengati, as indeed should not the coral pools off Pirotan to those of the Great Barrier Reef of Australia. How do we highlight the very great uniqueness of our 'tame' Lions and 'trampable' corals from the 'fierce' lions and less approachable corals of distant lands? This is the challenge for us even as we strive to 'sell' Gujarat as a 'destination'.

What we must advertise is Gujarat as an entity, not specific locations. Gujarat of sunlight, of blue skies and restless winds, of calm seas and stretches of beaches dazzling white, of huge flocks of approachable pelicans, flamingos and other birds, of a cordial and hospitable people with a colourful history of blending attitudes, faiths and a deep veneration of Life. But even as we lure visitors let us plan vigorously to encourage our youth to take to kayaking, wind surfing, sailing, para-gliding, trekking and rock climbing. Let the mistake not be made of developing tourism in isolation of the people. This is where the challenge lies, and I am here to pose this challenge. Let the people be the motivators and the beneficiaries. □